

The Philosophy of Permission

in Post-AI Picture Making

A treatise by Alex Chisnall

Preface

This treatise is written for two audiences. First, for practising artists who question their place in a creative landscape increasingly shaped by generative technologies. Second, for prompt engineers and developers who are building the tools that shape image production. These two groups are often portrayed as rivals, but this work treats them as potential collaborators. It invites a dialogue and intends to bridge the gap by showing how each can help the other. Artists can regain time and income by working efficiently with generative tools. Engineers can build more meaningful systems by learning from the structure and intentionality found in traditional image-making.

This perspective comes from the convergence of three roles. I am a lecturer in mathematics and understand how logic shapes systems. I study pedagogy and recognise the power of permission in learning. I am a self-taught artist who applied these tools to train myself in picture making. These experiences as teacher, researcher, and practitioner inform what follows. Permissionism is offered here as a framework for navigating a volatile image economy while preserving the values that make art meaningful.

The treatise is divided into two parts. Part I builds the theory by defining permissionism and the visual philosophy it proposes. Part II shifts in tone and turns to application: evaluating tools, examining real-world constraints, and presenting methods drawn from practice. The goal is to offer a structure for consistent image-making that helps artists reclaim agency and encourages developers to build tools that support creative intent.

This treatise has been written with deliberate conciseness to maximise legibility and reach. While many claims here invite deeper exploration, clarity of theme has been prioritised over exhaustive coverage. Further work will follow to address concerns raised by the claims made here, and specialised writings dedicated to specific fields will follow as demanded.

Part I: Permissionist Theory

1.0 Introduction

We are living through a period of artistic disorientation. Image generation is instantaneous, and artists are expected to compete with machines trained on their own work. In this environment, the visual arts face a crisis of direction. What is worth making? What skills are worth developing? What makes a picture matter now? This treatise introduces permissionism: a framework for understanding how visual ideas propagate and how artists can reclaim the authority of their work through clarity of intent. It is not a system of rules but rather a method for reading, creating, and sharing work that endures.

The theory builds upon three guiding principles:

- All artworks are built upon the permissions granted by prior creators.
- Sublime works grant new permissions that shape the boundaries of future creation.
- The long-term success of a permission is determined by its propagation.

Within this framework, a permissionist work is one that expands what others feel allowed to attempt by granting structural or conceptual freedoms that they can adopt.

1.1 What Is a Permission?

The Cambridge Dictionary defines permission concisely: “If someone is given permission to do something, they are allowed to do it.” Permission as it is used in this work originates from Eric Berne’s Transactional Analysis, where it describes a positive psychological message enabling autonomous decision-making. In artistic terms: A permission is a new possibility for picture-making, often inferred from the success or authority of a sublime work.

A permission alters what other artists believe they are entitled to attempt. It functions most powerfully when the source is perceived as legitimate. A child might grant their parent permission to skip work and stay home to play. The parent might wish to agree, but the child is not actually in a position to give that kind of permission. Therefore, in order to function, a permission must come from a perceived position of authority.

In art, legitimacy can be conferred through sublimity more than status. The strength of a sublime work allows it to stand alone and be enjoyed without any prior knowledge of who created it.

1.2 Why Use the Word “Permission”?

Unlike “inspiration” (which is emotional) or “technique” (which is mechanical), permission names the psychological and structural change that occurs in the artist’s mind when they encounter new potential. It captures how art evolves: by precedents more than by rules.

When an artist encounters an approach they didn’t realize was allowed and then adopts it, a permission has been transmitted.

2.0 The Sublime

Permissions are transmitted through sublimity. The classical definition of the sublime comes from Longinus:

“The sublime is a certain loftiness and excellence of language, which takes the reader out of himself.” (On the Sublime, 1st c.)

This treatise extends the definition to visual art: Sublime work is that which reorders the viewer's perception of visual possibility.

Within permissionism, we identify three essential pillars:

- Intent — intellectual authorship of visual decisions.
- Knowledge — awareness and control of picture-making fundamentals.
- Material Performance — a visible human interaction with the surface.

These pillars are not guarantees of sublimity, but they are consistently present in the works that achieve it. Their interaction creates a unified effect known as gestalt, in which the whole resonates more powerfully than the sum of its parts. Sublime performance is typically recognised through this cohesion, rhythm, and deliberate control.

2.1 Intent

Intent is the deliberate effort to shape an image around a coherent internal vision. Although intent cannot be seen directly, it becomes evident through the structure of the work. When a combination of pictorial elements contribute to a unified idea, the viewer can recognise that the artist was in control of their decisions. In historical works, we infer intent by examining how visual choices support the image's conceptual purpose. This is not a task limited to scholars, most viewers can sense when an image holds together with clear purpose. That coherence is the clearest sign of intent.

2.2 Knowledge

Knowledge refers to the artist's understanding of picture-making elements and how to control them. It is not general intelligence, but functional literacy in visual fundamentals (to be defined below). Fitts & Posner (1967) describe three stages of skill acquisition: cognitive (awareness), associative (refinement), and autonomous (mastery). An artist should, at minimum, develop a basic understanding of each fundamental and attain mastery in the ones they choose to prioritize. Without this, neither meaningful Intent nor coherent Material Performance can likely emerge.

2.3 Material Performance

Material performance is the physical translation of thought into form. This is not limited to brushwork or texture, but includes any mark or decision that reveals control, judgment, and authorship through the medium itself. In digital or minimalist work where mark-making is less visible, material performance must instead be felt through evidence of intent and decisive execution. What matters is not that the artist's hand is literally seen, but that the viewer can sense the artist's control in the final work.

3.0 The Fundamentals

To understand what permissions are granted, we must first define what components a picture can consist of. We call core principles “fundamentals” which can be elevated or suppressed depending on artistic intent.

1. Narrative/Concept – The story, theme, or philosophical idea behind the image.
2. Composition/Design – The organization of elements for visual hierarchy.
3. Gesture – The expressive movement or flow within forms.
4. Structure/Form – The three-dimensional logic that defines volume and solidity.
5. Spatial Calibration – The control of scale, depth, and perspective.
6. Shape Design – The clarity and rhythm of abstract silhouettes.
7. Value/Light–Shadow – Tonal structure, contrast, and light logic.
8. Colour – Palette, temperature, harmony, and symbolism.
9. Edge Control – The transition between forms; softness, hardness, lost/found.
10. Surface Handling – The material texture of the image (brushwork, line, or mark), often highly influenced by choice of medium.

Each of these can serve as a vehicle for intent, and may be emphasised or deemphasised depending on the artist’s priorities.

4.0 Iteration and Innovation

Iteration is the reworking of existing permissions through personal filters. It differs from unconscious copying because it is deliberate, adaptive, and expressive. Iterative artists effectively refine the field of art.

Berne’s analogy (1972) clarifies this:

“True permissions are merely permits, like a fishing license... He can use it or not as he wishes, and he goes fishing when he feels like it and when circumstances allow.”

Innovation, by contrast, is the generation of a new freedom. It is when an artist creates a work that changes what others believe is possible. Innovation begins as a private act, but gains cultural traction when the idea is transmitted through sublimity. Extending Berne’s analogy:

The fisherman who uses his licence to cast from the surface realises he is limited to shallow prey. He strengthens his body and trains his breath to dive deeper, discovering crabs below that were previously unreachable. The community can then build on this new permission, devising crab pots to access the same depth without the need to dive.

Iteration is fundamental, and innovation is transformative. While innovation generates new permissions, iteration sustains and expands existing ones. Many artists create culturally significant works through iteration alone, preserving and refining permissions that might otherwise be forgotten.

Some innovations arise not from conscious exploration but from accident, surprise, or mistake. What distinguishes these moments is not their origin, but the artist's awareness. In permissionist terms, this too can be innovation, because it expands possibility and, once transmitted, grants new permissions. The artist recognises the value of an unforeseen event and chooses to build upon it.

5.0 Propagation

A permission becomes culturally significant when it propagates. It must be received, adopted, and transformed by others to do so. A permission that fails to move beyond the originator remains a private innovation, structurally valid but culturally latent. This model of transmission shares intellectual ground with Nelson Goodman's theory of worldmaking (1978), which describes how symbolic systems do not merely reflect the world but actively construct new ones. Like Goodman's worlds, permissionist structures reshape the perceptual and conceptual landscape for others. However, where Goodman focused on symbolic logic, permissionism is concerned with the cultural transmission of artistic structure and how forms of intent and decision-making become usable by others.

This framework is best understood through Richard Dawkins' original theory of the meme (*The Selfish Gene*, 1976), which he defined as a unit of cultural transmission. A meme spreads by being seen, understood, and imitated. In permissionist theory, a meme is any visual strategy or conceptual structure embedded in an artwork that is carried forward through replication or transformation by others.

Importantly, propagation is not popularity, it is the survival of an idea's structure. A work is propagative when its ideas endure through use, not mere attention.

5.1 Selection Pressure

Gallery systems, digital platforms, and critical institutions shape the landscape in which permissions live or die. These structures act as selection pressures, amplifying or suppressing visibility. Over time, however, sublimity cuts through. Strong permissions survive adverse conditions because they offer practical utility and inspirational clarity.

We see this in subcultures like tattooing and street art, which initially faced intense institutional resistance. Despite being excluded from traditional art venues, their innovations propagated through sheer public adoption. These cases demonstrate the robustness of certain permissions: when the work resonates with individual creators, it finds its way into circulation regardless of gatekeeping.

5.2 Intrinsic Motivation and Modelling

Artists do not adopt new ways of working simply because they are told to. They adopt them when the work of others resonates deeply by modelling something meaningful, expressive, or challenging. Ryan & Deci's theory of intrinsic motivation (2000) argues that sustained creative behaviour arises when the activity itself is experienced as worthwhile. By its nature, a permissionist work offers that kind of intrinsic reward to both its creator and its viewers.

Albert Bandura's theory of observational learning (1977) supports this view. People are more likely to emulate behaviours they see performed by figures they relate to or admire. In the permissionist framework, this means a permission becomes transmissible when the act of seeing someone do it gives the viewer the sense that they, too, are allowed.

5.3 Cultural Drift and Noise

Not all propagation is adaptive. Some works survive through trend, fashion, or accident: what Dick Hebdige (1979) describes as “subcultural drift”. This noise in the cultural system can obscure strong permissions, but it can also preserve them in diluted form. Permissionist analysis accepts this drift, but does not confuse short term survival with long term strength.

5.4 Forget Being First

It is possible to grant a powerful permission without being the first to explore a concept. Consider Hilma af Klint: her abstract works predate Kandinsky, but her influence is delayed. Kandinsky, though arguably second to pure abstract composition, propagated the permission due to the cultural readiness and visibility of his work. Both artists produced permissionist work.

Innovation lies not in invention alone, but in making the invention visible and usable. Sublime work grants permissions once the viewer understands that those possibilities are available to them.

5.5 On Copyright and Ownership

Permissionism offers a direct critique of idea ownership. Copyright law protects fixed expressions, not structural concepts. The assumption that an artist can own an idea or style is a legal fiction that is fundamentally contradictory to the way cultural transmission works.

Permissions are meant to be used. Once granted, they can rarely be retracted. Under permissionism, the artist seeks to inspire others and welcomes having their ideas built upon, treating influence as proof of value. To grant a permission is to renounce the idea of owning it.

Part II: Application — Method, Workflow, and Reflection

6.0 Tool Use

Tools are extensions of thought, not replacements for it. Within permissionism, a tool is acceptable if it enhances the artist's capacity for intent, knowledge, and material performance. It ceases to support authorship when it bypasses them entirely.

This is the basis of the tool-use test:

Does the tool allow the artist to do something they can already do, more efficiently? Or is it allowing them to produce outcomes they do not yet understand?

This test stems from Anders Ericsson's theory of deliberate practice (Peak, 2016). Tools must be used with awareness, to develop targeted skills and mental representations. When a tool replaces understanding, it undermines the user's claim to authorship.

6.1 Exceptions for Education

During learning, it is reasonable to temporarily substitute one skill in order to focus on another. Using tracing to study lighting, or 3D models to study perspective, can be valuable as long as the student knows what is being substituted and returns later to close the gap. Dependence becomes especially dangerous when the substitution is unconscious.

6.2 Optical Tools and Image Capture

The camera obscura is a projection device that allows artists to trace real-world scenes. It was likely used by Vermeer, Caravaggio, and others, with David Hockney's *Secret Knowledge* (2001) presenting strong evidence for its historical application. The camera, as it evolved into photography, expanded this function by automating the process of image capture entirely.

From a permissionist perspective, these tools are neutral. What matters is whether the artist remains in control. If the artist understands the structure of space and uses optical tools to assist in capturing likeness or perspective, the intent remains intact. The permission lies in the delegation of spatial calibration, not its abandonment.

Photography used as reference can be valid. Tracing or gridding a photo can be permissionist if done with clear intent. But when these tools are used without understanding (when copying replaces thinking) the artist has ceded authorship. That loss is often visible in the final work.

6.4 Digital Art

When drawing onto a screen you are manipulating data (The RGB values of coloured pixels) rather than a tangible surface. This does not eliminate material performance entirely because a stylus wielded by a skilled hand can still convey nuance and control. As the digital medium continues to evolve, our analysis must remain grounded in the same test of whether we are expanding artistic capacity or replacing it.

The permissions granted by digital artists are real. The supreme control over composition, space and edge afforded by digital art is undeniable. However, the threat to the legitimacy of digital drawings from AI image generation must also be considered in this light.

6.5 AI and Prompted Generation

Prompt-based AI systems create a major challenge to permissionist thinking. By design, they bypass material performance by simulating structure, colour, and composition but there is a lack of human understanding underpinning the process.

An artist can work with AI in a permissionist way only if they maintain full intellectual control. This treatise claims that using AI to generate variations of a hand-crafted composition can be legitimate under strict guidelines.

It is common to hear that AI is already damaging livelihoods by outcompeting living artists in iterative image production. This is a misdiagnosis. The real competition is not with the machine, but with the individuals who use it to flood the visual space with images. Many such users operate without clear intent, developed skill, or demonstrable authorship, relying instead on speed and quantity to dominate attention.

In any market system, competition is unavoidable. What must change is how that competition is understood. The permissionist does not attempt to win by taking down the tool, or matching the output of mindless prompt generation. Instead, they shift the contest toward creativity, clarity, and control. A skilled artist working with AI as a tool to support their own compositions will typically produce work of higher quality than someone who outsources both the composition and the rendering.

Used properly, AI can accelerate the production of authored ideas. When the artist retains control over the form and purpose of the image, the work gains unity. That unity is what distinguishes the permissionist from the prompter. It is also what ensures their relevance.

In a post-AI context, innovation increasingly shifts upstream. Composition, narrative framing, and structural intent become the primary sites of creative authorship. The role of the artist moves from executor to orchestrator by defining the framework within which the tool operates. Innovation in this space lies less in the finished images, but in inventing structures of delegation that maintain fidelity to vision while extending executional reach.



7.0 Methods

Chat GPT 4o was used in the production of the above image on 04/05/2025.

Working in Procreate, I produced a hand-drawn sketch, followed by a colour and composition study for this piece. The structural design was locked before any AI involvement began. Once the image had been fully visualised, AI was employed to render the concept to a finished state.

The goal of this process was to demonstrate how a visual idea can be communicated to a generative model through a structured composition and narrative seed. The sketch functioned as a translation layer, allowing the AI to interpret spatial hierarchy, character relationships, and mood. It was a compositional scaffold intended to guide the rendering phase. Like any study in traditional workflows, it served as a foundation for ongoing development.

Throughout the prompting process, compositional decisions were refined. Adjustments to posture, gaze, and scale were made to support clarity and narrative intent as the image evolved. Each iteration was assessed on its alignment with the underlying idea more than its similarity to the sketch. The artist's role in this workflow is to define structure, evaluate output, and make targeted corrections. This method shows how generative tools can be directed toward authored outcomes when the creative hierarchy remains intact.

For those unfamiliar with Dungeons and Dragons, the image depicts a beholder (a formidable beast with an antimagic eye), seemingly imprisoned by a mage who is examining a playing card. Those well-versed in the game's lore will likely guess that he possesses a Deck of Many Things: an artifact capable of bestowing god-like gifts or cataclysmic magical effects with no guarantee of what you'll get. Unless, of course, you find a way to stack the deck.

We are stumbling into this scene. The nervous, ominous atmosphere is heightened by the warped perspective of the door, which acts as a compositional element and adds a sense of smallness in the face of the monumental power before us. At first, we are afraid of the beholder, but we quickly realize that the mage, calm in the situation and simply conducting research, is the real threat here.

What do you do? Fighting the beholder seems too stupid to mention. Challenging the powerful mage to 1v1 combat seems equally foolish. Running or hiding does not make this problem disappear, is surrender the only option?

This image presents an impossible choice. But in such a situation, I believe it demands thinking outside the box. Outcompeting your enemy with the very tools they are using against you sounds like a preferable option to any other. Dash for the cards. All other paths admit defeat.



7.1 Proof of concept.

The process of generating the beholder scene required approximately eight hours of engaged iterative prompting. The workflow was inefficient but necessary, functioning as a form of calibration for both myself and the model. Once that image was complete, I initiated a second test using a different sketch to assess whether the process could be streamlined. This time the workflow was noticeably faster. The model had contextual memory of my prior intent, and I had a more refined understanding of how to guide the system within its constraints. As a result, my second image (shown below) was completed in approximately four hours. It is based on a simple sketch I made several years ago, now fully realized in rendered form. The outcome confirmed that the process could be made more efficient through familiarity, targeted prompting, and a stable compositional seed.



7.2 Method Analysis

The central challenge of AI image generation is that the system starts from scratch every time. Each image begins as random noise, unrelated to previous outputs. The AI generates each output independently, based on the prompt and any conditioning inputs, without persistent memory or refinement. It does not refine, it regenerates. This lack of continuity contributed to most of the structural problems I encountered. Corrections were inconsistent because each attempt reconstructs the entire image anew. Visual drift occurs, even with identical prompts, because the model has no internal reference point. Gesture, perspective, and object accuracy suffer for the same reason.

Edge maps provided a partial solution. By converting sketches into simplified line structures, the model was forced to adhere more closely to the intended composition. Results were significantly more stable when these edge maps were used. However, fidelity was still not guaranteed. The model would sometimes ignore key lines, rework parts of the sketch, or fill in regions with unrelated visual material. Specifying the exact canvas ratio also improved consistency. By fixing the proportions of the output, the model was more likely to preserve layout and spatial balance, but even this was not foolproof. The model would occasionally generate images in the wrong dimensions, forcing resubmission and prompting tweaks to enforce the correct aspect ratio.

The most reliable improvement to the method came from describing the narrative in exhaustive detail. The clearer the story, the characters, setting, and intent, the more the model could align its guesses with the desired outcome. In the absence of true memory or editing tools, this narrative precision became the primary method of control.

7.3 Implications

The current method represents a compromise. While language models like GPT-4 can interpret narrative, character, and compositional intent with surprising fluency, they lack the capacity to iterate reliably. Other systems offer superior fidelity by strictly adhering to edge maps, but at the cost of conversational flexibility. What is needed is a model that combines both: the structural control of edge-conditioned models with the interpretive depth of a language model trained specifically in artistic critique. Analysis of all available image generation techniques is beyond the scope of this treatise; chat GPT has been used here as it is likely the model most people are aware of and have access to. It is not recommended that chat GPT be the tool of choice for artists in the future, such a tool must be one developed outside of a closed and gatekept system.

The root of the problem is pedagogical. Current popular generative models have been trained on vast but directionless datasets that are largely photographic, commercial, or amateur. These models have internalized a technical but hollow visual language. They must unlearn this baseline and be retrained to think like artists. Composition should not be invented by the AI. That is the role of the artist, and it is fast. Rendering is slow, and the bulk of the rendering work could be automated. For this, fidelity to the original sketch must be controllable.

The implications for authorship are clear. The human takes on multiple roles in this pipeline: first, the concept artist who defines the image; then, the teacher who corrects and refines; and finally, the art director who assesses and approves output. Control should remain with the artist. In professional contexts, unpredictability is not a creative feature, it is a liability. Every part of the process must be stable, consistent, and repeatable.

Commercial viability is not yet achieved. The process is too slow and too fragile. But the direction is promising. A dedicated, open-source model built specifically for working artists (trained pedagogically, not by passive data scraping) could radically change this. Such a model would benefit from training engineers that act as skilled artists and teachers who design bespoke images that inform the system of specific visual logic. This would close the communication gap between human and machine, making the AI a more fluent, natural tool.

Ultimately, the future of this method lies in amplifying the artist rather than replacing them. Rendering for commercial work can and should be outsourced to machines, but the intent, composition, and narrative must remain in human hands.

8.0 Ethical Considerations

The permissionist framework does not prescribe moral rules. It describes relationships between artists, tools, and cultural transmission. However, the widespread disruption caused by AI image generation invites unavoidable ethical reflection. These questions are not about whether new tools should exist, but how artists should position themselves within their influence.

8.1 Disclosure and Authorship

Artists have often used tools in secret. The historical record is filled with unspoken methods, concealed techniques, and quiet shortcuts. This tendency should not be condemned as it simply reflects human nature. However, artists who choose to be transparent are continuing the pedagogical lineage that allowed themselves to learn. There is no obligation to disclose, but there is value in doing so. The artist who sees themselves as part of a lineage will feel this intuitively.

8.2 Dataset Ethics and AI Design

Instead of fixating on the legality of AI training data, this treatise poses a deeper question: Is this the best way to build an image model? Current tools produce average results because they are trained on average work. Repetition dominates because repetition dominates the data. Composition, subtlety, and originality are often flattened. Even within this work, AI has produced output skewed toward bland, centre-weighted design, likely because such images are overrepresented in training sets.

Permissionism challenges this logic. If we want AI to serve artists rather than dilute them, the model must be retrained to follow, not lead. An open-source rendering tool, designed to interpret pre-existing sketches and authored compositions, would preserve authorial control. This kind of tool would not replace artists. It would allow them to delegate time consuming tasks.

8.3 Centralisation and Gatekeeping

Monopolised systems distort propagation. Platforms that restrict access based on copyright enforcement, financial threshold, or social standing determine who is allowed to compete. Worse, their logic is inconsistent. An AI model may block the rendering of a famous character due to copyright flagging, yet allow the use of a lesser-known one because its data is incomplete. These constraints often create asymmetries that disproportionately disadvantage individual artists.

The solution, again, is artist control. When the artist defines the composition, and the model renders it, there is no ambiguity of authorship. The artist owns the decision-making. The machine does the work.

9.0 Conclusions

Permissionism does not dismiss any form of artistic expression, nor does it prioritize innovation at the expense of iterative skill. Rather, it offers a flexible philosophical framework enabling artists to navigate contemporary challenges (particularly those posed by AI) without diminishing traditional artistic practices.

I have described how visual ideas spread and how new freedoms are created through images. When a picture grants permission, it expands what other artists feel allowed to do. It becomes part of the creative lineage. These permissions grow stronger when they are transmitted through sublime work.

Transactional analysis teaches that permission is the starting point for change. It must be freely given, and it should be understood as an invitation. The same principle applies in art. When a viewer sees something new and recognises its clarity, it creates space for them to act. The artist who constructs such a work participates meaningfully in shaping the future of visual culture. AI tools have changed the pace and volume of image production; artists now face a new kind of competition driven by speed and scale. When an artist directs the work with purpose and uses the tool in service of an idea, the outcome carries value. The artist who studies composition, light, space, and storytelling builds a skillset that is very difficult to reproduce by prompting alone.

As visual culture becomes increasingly automated and disembodied, the directness of physical media may offer a counterweight where permission returns to irreducible material presence. Physical art remains uniquely valuable because it provides tangible, unmediated human connection that digital media cannot fully replicate. As digital saturation grows, so does the demand for authentic physical artefacts that embody direct artistic expression, craftsmanship, and historical continuity. Artists may consider this reality in their efforts to compete commercially against pervasive digital media.

A permissionist future is built through collaboration, transmission of ideas and the pursuit of meaningful visual outcomes. Picturemaking remains one of the most direct ways to record human judgment and is likely to continue doing so long into the future. In a time of accelerating automation, the act of creating endures as a vital declaration of human presence and must be preserved through continued sharing of artistic traditions.

You have permission to make art however you like.

You have permission to use AI.

You have permission to educate yourself in any field, regardless of prior experience.

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